





The Yard of Tame Birds

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We've moved to a new flat! Mummy and Daddy keep walking around and looking at the walls and ceilings. They can't admire them enough. I'm happy, too. Now I'll be able to run about as much as I like for none of the chairs has sharp corners.

But I still won't forget our old flat. I have even dreamt at night about our window.

And Mummy says that it wasn't an ordinary window but really magic.

There was a large shaggy maple outside. One of its long branches, which Mummy called a "paw", stretched right up to our window and its leaves gently swished against the windowpanes.

Sometimes we flung open both windowpanes and the maple stretched towards us and blew tingling cold air in our faces.

The sun filtered through its leaves and the light in our room became slightly green-tinted. Golden sunbeams scampered in and shadows hovered on the floor and walls. They would creep up to the bright sunbeams which would dart away, jumping this way and that.

Mummy used to say:
"It doesn't feel as if we're living in the city, but do you know where? In a woodland hut...."





In the autumn when the leaves fell, everything in the room became brighter and whiter. Then other wonderful things began to happen. The lovely old maple held out its paw to the tomtits which landed on it in flocks.

"Hello, friends!" Mummy would say. "I hope you have a happy winter!"

Then a café, which we called the "Tweat-Tweat", opened in our casement window. We put a plank down and sprinkled sunflower seeds on it.

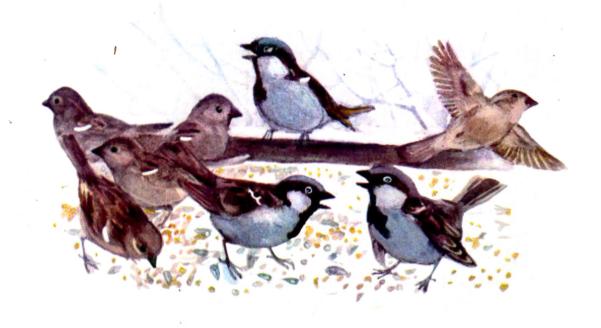
Our visitors didn't wait long. They sidled along the branch towards the window, glancing round quickly and spinning in all directions, huddling in a ball against the branch and then stretching on their spindly legs as if standing on tip-toe.

"What fine little show-offs!" Mummy would say and she was really right.

They all had little black caps tilted onto their beaks, black breasts, green backs and striped wings. They were always delightful to look at!...

No, they didn't dive straight at the food. A tomtit would sweep down from the branch, flit onto the window, grab a seed and fly back to the branch. Then it pressed the seed against the branch with its foot, pecked off the shell with its beak like a little hammer and got to the tasty seed. One after the other, they would fly into the café as if they were taking it in turns!





I used to think that all birds were the same but then some sparrows dropped in on us. What a din they made! They fought and grabbed the seeds from each other.

"Hey, you trouble-makers!"
Mummy said. "Who tears into a flat in a crowd? You should learn some good manners from the tomtits. They're from the same family as you sparrows but they're most polite and don't squabble or fight."

One day a tomtit arrived who wasn't quite the same as his fellows. At first I couldn't understand why, but then I looked more closely and saw that it didn't have a tail! I'm not joking, it only had a grey bit of fluff for a tail!

So, I began to call this tomtit "Stubby"

Perhaps it had been in the claws of a cat? Who knows? But I don't think its character had been spoilt by this. It was just as frisky as the rest.

One day Stubby was sitting in the cafe, tucking into the seeds, pecking and spitting them out one after the other.

Suddenly another tomtit swooped onto the plank, puffed out its chest and hopped towards Stubby who flitted to one side crouched down and held onto the edge



of the seed box with both feet. But the bully hopped closer and closer and even spread its wings. Stubby was forced to fly away "empty-handed". The bully probably didn't accept it as one of its flock and so had chased it away.

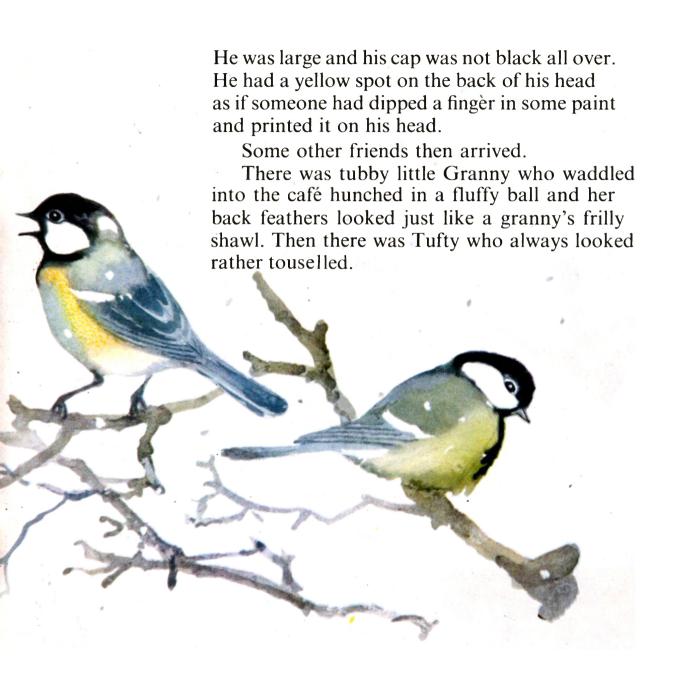
"Oh, what a bossy bird!" laughed Mummy who had seen it all.

I felt angry. How dare that bossy bird not let Stubby get a seed!

But Mummy said: "It serves him right for barging into and holding up the queue!"

I kept my eye on the Boss from then on.







It reminded us of our neighbour Marinka who brushed her fringe up and not down. This tomtit would cock its head on one side and its black eyes twinkled, again just like Marinka in front of the mirror.

One day the wind shook the plank and our café collapsed. The plank fell onto the windowsill between the two windowpanes, just like into a glass well. Of course, all the seeds fell down, too. The window couldn't be opened because it was sealed with putty in winter. What could we do?

While we were thinking, Tufty flew onto the casement-window. It was obviously the scout. It span round and round and then courageously dived down, first onto the handle and then onto the windowsill itself. With the booty in its beak it flew back in the same way.

Other tomtits began to scurry to and fro in the same way—window-top, handle, windowsill. They must have been sitting on the side and memorised their scout's movements! What clever birds!

It was fun in our flat in the mornings, especially on Sundays when my parents didn't go out to work. We would wake up, listen to the tomtits twittering and think of what it sounded like.

"It's like thin steel knittingneedles clicking together," said Mummy. "They're knitting socks for Winter and getting her ready to leave. She has a long way to go, right to the North Pole."

I imagined my Granny sitting somewhere in her frilly shawl with some knitting-needles and a ball of wool.... "It's like thawing snow in spring," Mummy said another time.



"Listen! Tiny drops of water are falling in a little pool of water on the ice: ting, ting, ting."

"Thawing snow!" Daddy explained in surprise. "Just look at the window—it's got frosty patterns all over it. And there's a really hard frost outside! Look how white, crisp and crunchy it is." But Mummy stood her ground: "Well, so what if there's a frost!"

It wasn't for nothing that the tomtits kept repeating: "Welcome spring! You see, spring was drawing closer every day. I believed the tomtits because they fly high and can see whether spring was approaching.

"Isn't that Stubby telling the spring to hurry up?" I wondered. "She's colder than the rest for she's only got a bit of stuff for a tail...."

We got up and did our chores. I dressed, and washed and sang all the time:



"Ting, ting, welcome spring.
"Ting, ting, welcome spring!"

Daddy started laughing:

"What good imaginations you've got, girls!"

One day I heard some strange twittering. It was horribly loud and grated on the ears. I looked out of the window into the yard and saw a little boy I didn't know.



He was craning his neck and I don't know how his cap stayed on his head. He did not notice me and his eyes darted over our maple. He was holding a cage in his hands.

He was calling to the birds!

I rushed onto the porch with Mummy behind me. The boy was no longer alone in the yard. Our old downstairs neighbour was talking to him.

"I see! Everyone else has been feeding them, and now you've come along with a trap?"

I shouted at once: "How dare you! Take your cage away!"

But Mummy tugged me by the sleeve and whispered: "Wait!"

"Wait!" she said to our neighbour. "You must explain to him first. You see, lad, the thing is we've got a kind of wildlife reserve here."

"Oh, yes!" said the boy disbelievingly.





"Have we, Mummy?" I asked in amazement.

"Of course! This yard is a wildlife reserve," she said.

"That's what I was getting at," our neighbour chimed in. "The little birds, I said, trust us, so please don't go and let the side down!"

The boy stamped on the snow and muttered under his breath:

"A reserve! You should get a keeper, then, and write 'No Admittance' on it."

Our old neighbour put his thick mitten up to his ear:

"What d'ye say? Speak louder, don't be shy. Keepers? What about just following your conscience?"

"That's right!" Mummy said cheerfully. "It's quite simple: you just need to follow your conscience."

Have you ever seen an owl blinking in the light? Its eyes blink

open and shut. I saw one once in a pets corner. The little boy batted his eyes in just the same way.

Then he walked out of our wildlife reserve with the cage under his arm.

...The old house has already been pulled down and a large new one has been built in its place. We live on another street on the fourth floor. There's no maple creeping up to our window.

"But we've plenty of sky," said Mummy. "And the stars and clouds are now ours."

"But what about the tomtits?" I asked.





"The tomtits have flown away to the woods for the summer. But we'll see what happens in the autumn," Mummy replied. "I think that if we had a café, we'd soon have guests, too. The fourth floor's nothing for our feathered friends, is it?"

Perhaps our friends from our old flat will come? But perhaps my Stubby, Granny, Tufty and Scout and the Boss with the yellow spot on his head will hover and twitter outside other windows.

If you see them, remember they trust people.





